

Personal, Professional, and Sociocultural Experiences of African American Female School Leaders

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The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and gain an in-depth understanding of the personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences of ten African American female school leaders serving as assistant principals, principals, and central office administrators in four suburban school districts in the southeast region of the United States. By exploring the lives of these school leaders, greater insights may be gained to open the door to this underrepresented population. This research may be valuable for professional development planning and educational leadership programs with the objective of recruiting and retaining more African American female suburban school leaders.

Women comprise approximately 84% of the teaching workforce in public schools in the United States, yet female leaders only comprise approximately 29% of principalships in public schools and within the 29%, African American women only hold 10% of the principalships in public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007-2008). Women are “overrepresented in teaching” but “underrepresented in administration” (Shakeshaft, 1999, p. 100). The irony is women are the majority of students enrolled in educational administration programs (Shakeshaft, Brown, Irby, Grogan, & Ballenger, 2007; Sherman, 2005). With expansive research, educational leadership, equity, diversity, and social justice have become significant topics of interest (Horsford, 2012; Loder, 2002). Moreover, the stigma of gender and racial biases are quite common in today's society, including school districts where women and people of color are often ignored for leadership positions (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). Society plays a critical role in forming gendered norms and expectations for men and women (Lorber, 1994). African American men and women encounter race and gender issues as part of society's “fundamental organizing principle of social structure” (Collins, 1998, p. 209).

Educational leadership in the 21st century requires individuals who have the ability to build positive working relationships with individuals from diverse backgrounds with diverse experiences (Tatum, 2007). A key factor of this realization is the need to recruit and retain more African American women in school leadership positions (Brown, 2005). The history of women in leadership does not provide a fair and proportionate representation compared to their male counterparts (Shakeshaft, 1999). The significant contributions of African Americans, especially women, in the areas of education and educational leadership have been greatly undervalued (Jackson, 1999; Reed & Evans, 2008).

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Therefore, it is imperative to know the personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences of African American female school leaders in order to garner a different perspective of educational leadership.

By sharing their personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences, African American female school leaders may provide the insight needed for current and aspiring minority female school leaders. An increased effort to “recruit and retain women of color at all levels” of educational leadership is drastically important (Tillman and Cochran, 2000, p. 50). Although women have made modest progress over the years, not much is known about the personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences of minority women as leaders in the educational field (Celikten, 2005).

Research Questions

This phenomenological study was guided by the following central research question: What perspectives do these study participants have regarding their personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences of being an African American female school leader in a suburban school district? The sub-questions for the study were: (a) What challenges have participants encountered as an African American female school leader in a suburban school district? (b) How do participants deal with these challenges? (c) What positive experiences have occurred because of being an African American female school leader in a suburban school district? (d) How do participants acknowledge these positive experiences? (e) How do participants balance work, family, civic, and other obligations in their current position?

Methodology

Because of the primary focus on the lived experiences of study participants, a phenomenological study was conducted. From the researcher's perspective, the chosen approach, was the most logical choice in answering the research question. A phenomenological study delineated the meaning of lived experiences for several individuals (Creswell, 2007). The objective was to focus on what participants had in common—shared, lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). Two types of phenomenological approaches were identified in qualitative research. The first approach was known as hermeneutical phenomenology in which the research was adjusted toward participants' lived experiences (Van Manen as cited in Creswell, 2007). The second approach was known as transcendental phenomenology in which the researcher identifies a phenomenon to be studied, bracketed the researcher's own experiences, and collected data from several individuals who have experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas as cited in Creswell, 2007).

For the purpose of this study, hermeneutical phenomenology was utilized because of an interest in the real-life experiences of these 10 African American female school leaders in suburban school districts. According to Hatch (2002), hermeneutical phenomenology “combines both interpretive/hermeneutic methods and descriptive/phenomenological methods for the purpose of examining the lived experiences or life worlds of people being studied” (p. 29).

Sample

For this study, criterion sampling was utilized (Creswell, 2007) because participants represented individuals who were African American female school leaders in suburban school districts. Ten individuals identified as African American females who served as principals, assistant principals, and central office administrators with at least three years of service in suburban school districts were selected for this study. Each of the participants was briefly described below with regard to their pseudonym, year their educational career began, highest degree attained, job title, and years in current position as shown in Table 1. The participants were employed in four different suburban school districts in southeastern United States. Suburban schools “are located in residential areas on the outside of metropolitan areas and compared to many urban schools, often have higher standardized test scores, college going rates, and attendance rates” (Tefera, Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Chirichigno, 2011, p. 1).

Table 1
Participant Summary Data

Pseudonym	Year Began in Education	Highest Degree	Current Position	Years in Current Position
Angela	1993	Doctorate	High School Assistant Principal	5
Beverly	1986	Doctorate	Director of Student Support Services	7
Celeste	1998	Master’s	Elementary School Assistant Principal	2
Diane	1998	Educational Specialist	Elementary School Principal	2
Elise	1991	Doctorate	Middle School Principal	2
Faith	1999	Doctorate	Elementary School Principal	1
Gabrielle	1995	Doctorate	Elementary School Principal	1
Henrietta	1980	Educational Specialist (currently pursuing Doctorate)	Elementary School Principal	6
Ingrid	1997	Doctorate	Administrative Manager	2
Jaqueline	1992	Doctorate	Curriculum and Technology Coordinator	1

Data Collection

Data collection for this phenomenological study consisted of open-ended, face-to-face, one-hour interviews with study participants at sites designated by them. Prior to the interview, participants received a printout of the original questions. As the interview progressed, follow-up questions were asked to garner more details with regard to their experiences. Interview(s) were audiotaped with a digital recorder and transcribed in which study participants had the opportunity to review and check for accuracy. With open-ended questions, study participants had the opportunity to share their lived experiences without restraint from the researcher or other past findings (Creswell, 2008).

Data Analysis

Data were organized according to interviews of study participants. Multiple copies of the data were maintained (Creswell, 2008). Transcriptions were completed by typing the text files collected during interviews (Lichtman, 2012). From each transcript, key phrases or sentences were identified which related to study participants' experiences. Meanings were formulated from these significant phrases and sentences, which allowed common themes to surface (Creswell, 2007). This approach was defined as interpretive phenomenological analysis, which involved "the detailed examination of the lived experience of individuals" (Lichtman, 2012, p. 260).

After reading each participant's transcribed interview, the researcher created a table in Microsoft Word. The table consisted of three columns for data organization. In the first column, actual statements or raw data were provided (Saldana, 2009) from each participant's interview. In the second column, codes were specified based on notes from preliminary jotting of the responses given by participants (Creswell, 2007). A code was defined as "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldana, 2009, p. 3). These codes originated from the actual statements of study participants. In the third and final column, themes were recorded which emerged from the combination of preliminary jotting, actual statements or raw data, and codes. Themes surfaced because of the repeating ideas, which study participants, had in common (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

With regard to this research study, seven themes emerged which gave credence to the personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences of these 10 African American female suburban school leaders. **Personal experiences** were (a) race and gender in school leadership, (b) caring for family and self, (c) resilience and spirituality; **professional experiences** were (d) education and upward mobility, (e) mentoring and networking; **sociocultural experiences** were (f) effective communication and positive working relationships, and (g) child advocacy and community partnerships. The themes served as a reminder of what study participants encountered on a daily basis as they worked to serve their families, their schools, and their communities. Although responses varied among participants, themes provided a more vivid picture of their lived experiences as school leaders. Themes were connected with actual statements from study participants' transcribed interviews. All data were secured and locked in a combination safe.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

When checking for credibility and trustworthiness, researchers test whether the information gathered is accurate (Creswell, 2008). For this phenomenological study, credibility and trustworthiness were established by employing the following strategies: member checking, reflexive journaling, and thick, rich descriptions of respondent reports.

Member checking. Member checking was utilized by asking study participants to check the accuracy of themes, interpretations, and conclusions based on interviews (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The researcher communicated with each participant individually and asked for open and honest feedback regarding the findings through their interviews (Creswell, 2008). Participants were asked about the various components of the study in terms of an accurate and complete description of their experiences (Creswell, 2008). They were encouraged to communicate truthfully the accuracy of themes and interpretations based on their initial and possibly subsequent interviews (Creswell, 2008).

Reflexive journaling. Reflexive journaling was used to maintain a diary of information regarding the investigation, such as possible biases and methodological discussion (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The researcher reflected on experiences as an urban educator in order to discover the similarities and differences of decision-making, policies, and procedures in suburban and urban school districts. The cultures of each type of school district were examined. As an aspiring administrator, the researcher gained knowledge, which may be beneficial as a school leader in an urban or suburban school district. The researcher wanted to know firsthand what African American female school leaders do in order to be successful in their current leadership roles.

Descriptions. Thick, rich descriptions were employed because qualitative research allows the various stories or experiences of participants to be heard (Gamson, 2000). The purpose was for the reader to get the feel of what participants have experienced in their personal, professional, and sociocultural lives. In addition, readers could actually think about placing themselves in these experiences. A picture was painted with words, in terms of the reader visualizing in their minds, what participants faced as African American female school leaders in suburban school districts. Because participants were minorities in the area of educational leadership, the researcher believed their experiences needed to be included in current and future research.

An audit trail was established by meeting with the committee chair, methodologist, and other committee members, maintaining entries of research activities, conducting interviews, having discussions with fellow colleagues, completing transcriptions, initializing coding, and analyzing data (Creswell, 2007).

Results

For study participants, race and gender in school leadership was a challenge with regard to experiencing racism and sexism as they pursued leadership positions. Although Diane made history by becoming the first African American principal—male or female—in her school's history, she was unable to celebrate this historical accomplishment because of the uncertainty of others' reactions to her being selected as the school's leader. Fortunately, Diane was well received by parents, and students of color looked to her as a role model. With regard to gender, Ingrid faced repeated disappointments as she was

overlooked for a promotion to school principal, which subsequently went to male colleagues with less experience and less education. Ingrid also expressed humiliation and disrespect at the hands of a former principal. At one point in her career, she began to question her purpose and her value as a school leader. The words of Ingrid's youngest daughter instructing her to remember her purpose was just what Ingrid needed in order to regain focus and succeed.

In addition, caring for family and self was a major responsibility for study participants because they were wives, mothers, volunteers, and caregivers. Having a healthy balance between work and home was vital to participants' success as school leaders. Gabrielle noted it was a challenge to balance work and family, but she relied heavily upon "her village" and the art of compartmentalizing. She was able to employ the help of family and friends as well as organize her life as a wife, mother, and school leader. For Beverly, she had to learn the power of saying, "No", and she had to deal with the challenge of living with MS. Beverly admitted her physical health took precedence over everything else, and as a result of saying "no" and taking care of her health, she was able to fulfill her role as a school leader.

On the other hand, resilience and spirituality provided the strength and direction needed for being a school leader. Study participants had an unyielding faith and sense of spirituality, which enabled them to strive toward excellence (Alston, 2005). For Faith, being resilient and spiritually grounded was essential for her as she began her first-year as principal only one month before the death of her mother. After her mother's passing, Faith admitted there was no time for her to grieve or have a pity party because others were looking to her for guidance and strength as they faced challenges in their own lives. Despite being turned down for an assistant principal position seven times, Celeste exemplified resilience and maintained a positive attitude in the midst of rejection. She held the strong belief of persistence working in her favor as she pursued a school leadership position.

Education was considered the catalyst for upward mobility and the answer to a better quality of life. Even though earlier generations did not possess the same opportunities, parents instilled in study participants the value of attaining an education. Parents possessed wisdom or mother wit with regard to seeing the future benefits of being educated in today's society. Angela's parents were not college graduates, but they worked diligently to provide for their children. Despite their limited educational background, they conveyed the important message of education to Angela and her 12 siblings. Similarly, Henrietta's parents were not highly educated, but they stressed the importance of education and respecting others. As a Doctoral student, Henrietta knew knowledge was powerful and vital to the success of African American females who aspire to become school leaders. In her opinion, education coupled with a spirit of excellence was the key ingredient to being a successful school leader. Both Angela and Henrietta were living testaments to the impact of education in their lives as school leaders. Ironically, Ingrid was highly educated and experienced but was overlooked for a leadership position in her school district. Although Ingrid was taught education was the answer to a better quality of life, she experienced rejection despite her academic credentials.

The role of mentoring and networking was beneficial to study participants as well. Mentoring and networking provided the support needed for successful leadership.

Although not every school district had a formal mentoring program, study participants were not deterred in their efforts of being mentored and networking with others, which resulted in study participants mentoring aspiring school leaders themselves. As a first-year principal, Gabrielle found the school district did not have a formal mentoring program. However, she connected with a fellow colleague who assisted her in making a successful transition from assistant principal to principal. In Elise's case, she felt the need to stay one-step ahead; therefore, she remained in constant communication with the other two middle school principals in the district. Her philosophy was not to be caught "out on a limb" while everyone else was "still in the tree". She also employed the help of other school leaders outside of the district who kept her informed of pertinent information.

With regard to "paying it forward", Jacqueline delineated herself as a colleague of teachers and enjoyed mentoring them. She made a special effort to connect with individuals who were different and not easily embraced by the majority. She had grown accustomed to being the only minority based on race or gender. Therefore, she related well with others who were in the same situation. Jacqueline provided teachers and school leaders with opportunities to be themselves and not to allow anyone to fit them into a certain mold. Jacqueline explained how mentoring teachers and school leaders allowed her the opportunity to become better acquainted with who she was as a person.

Another key factor in study participants' success as school leaders was effective communication leading to positive working relationships. Participants utilized relational collaboration to build morale (Alston, 2005). For Celeste, she used the strategies from a class to build school community. She explained how the class changed her personal and professional life and resulted in her decision to empower others by teaching and demonstrating the need for positive working relationships. Upon learning school morale was low; Diane took the initiative of improving school morale by administering a survey to her faculty and staff. She was able to get a true picture of the school's culture. Because of the survey's results, Diane went into action by building up morale. She encouraged those under her leadership to recognize others within the school for doing great work. Further, she and her assistant principal presented gift cards to those who were selected during the month. Morale was improved and positive working relationships were formed.

Finally, being a child advocate and forming community partnerships were two responsibilities identified by study participants. According to Alston (2005), African American female school leaders choose service while leading and leave a legacy of service to others. The servant leader is a servant first and one who genuinely desires to serve others (Greenleaf, 1973). Hence, participants referred to themselves as servant leaders. Gabrielle acknowledged she was committed to the well-being of her students and held teachers to a high standard of academic instruction. She provided teachers with professional development opportunities to aid them in growing as classroom teachers providing better instruction to their students. As a principal, she stated it was her job to hire good teachers. As stated by Gabrielle, her number one priority was to ensure her students received quality classroom instruction.

In addition to classroom instruction, students needed to know the value of giving back to their communities. Therefore, Elise challenged her teachers and students to participate in service-learning projects within the community. Like Gabrielle, Elise firmly believed in providing teachers and students with the resources needed to be successful in their classroom. Her philosophy regarding leadership was embedded in becoming a

leader meant becoming a servant. As self-proclaimed servant leaders, Gabrielle and Elise worked diligently to meet the needs of those under their leadership by supporting and challenging them.

Although study participants expressed being a school leader was hard work and challenging at times, the consensus was participants loved and enjoyed being a school leader. Study participants' spirit of excellence was conveyed through their passion and commitment to their schools and surrounding communities through diligence and determination as they served as suburban school leaders.

Limitations of the Study

Data collection and analysis was confined to the participating 10 African American female school leaders in suburban school districts in the southeastern United States. This research study did not account for the experiences of other minority females in those particular school districts. The only data collected were study participant interviews. Participants were not observed in their daily routines as assistant principals, principals, and central office administrators. Teacher perspectives of participants' leadership style and ability were unaccounted for in this study. Researcher bias was a crucial component of the methodology and could not be completely omitted. However, member checking, reflexive journaling, and thick, rich descriptions were utilized for credibility and trustworthiness (Creswell, 2008). Although these strategies were advantageous in decreasing researcher bias, qualitative research takes into account the researcher's experiences. As a result, the conclusions drawn in this study were subject to other interpretations and analysis.

Discussion

As more women of color, whether African, Hispanic, Native American, or Asian, enter educational leadership, their lived experiences need to be an integral part of the conversations in empirical research. According to Clark (2011), "...an examination of how women lead can result in a deeper understanding of an educational leadership concept that reflects diverse perspectives and that involves a community as opposed to a single leader" (p. 91). There is a great need for more feminist research, which focuses on the lived experiences of women, especially women of color (Sherman, 2005). Notably, Clark (2011) asserted, "The increasing number of African American women in educational leadership positions has offered up a rich opportunity for the exploration of the ways in which women lead" (p. 91). The leadership styles and abilities of female school leaders, especially African Americans and other minority women, are worth exploring in-depth to gain a greater understanding of them as school leaders and gain more knowledge regarding their contributions to educational leadership. Therefore, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the personal, professional, and sociocultural lived experiences of 10 African American female school leaders in suburban school districts.

Within the K-12 school setting, demographically changing suburban schools are more prevalent than they were in previous years. Hence, more diversity needs to be seen in the leaders and models of leadership with regard to race and gender (Brown, 2005).

Despite challenges, setbacks, and disappointments, African American women in this study and others have exhibited resilience and achieved goals of becoming school leaders (Gregory, 2001). By discussing the personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences of these 10 African American female school leaders in suburban school districts, their voices addressed the gap in literature with regard to minority female school leaders. Participants' lived experiences depicted the challenges, setbacks, and disappointments, which came with being a minority female school leader. However, triumphs over racism and sex discrimination were also evident based on participants' roles as school leaders in suburban school districts.

Inequities still exist and small gains by women to attain leadership positions are not truly sustainable (Young, 2005). Therefore, attention needs to be given to the lived experiences of women, especially minority women, as school leaders. The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to explore the personal, professional, and sociocultural lived experiences of 10 African American female suburban school leaders in southeastern United States. African American female suburban school leaders must utilize their voices to share their lived experiences.

These findings may influence educational leadership programs and suburban school districts to recruit and retain more African American female suburban school leaders. Additionally, the findings of this research may provide recommendations for future studies of African American and minority women school leaders in suburban school districts. The results of this study are intended to aid educational researchers and educational practitioners in gaining a better understanding of the lived experiences of African American female suburban school leaders.

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